

NATHAN DENISON

WHEN?
1740-1809

WHERE? Wyoming Valley



EVENT: Denison was a leader of the Patriots during battle of Wyoming

VOCABULARY
Pennamites Puritan
Tories Yankees

Born on September 17, 1740 in Stonington, Connecticut, Nathan Denison lived in the family homestead built in 1717. His ancestors were part of the original Puritan settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. When he was older, he moved to Windham, Connecticut and later to Wyoming Valley in 1769. The government of Connecticut had encouraged its colonists to move westward to the land they claimed based on a grant from King Charles II in 1662.

The Susquehanna Company, formed in 1753, offered townships five miles square to anyone who would settle there and defend the land. They had purchased the land in what later became a controversial land deal from the Native Americans. By 1763, Connecticut settlers came to try and settle the area. They were attacked by the Natives and did not return until 1769.

Nathan Denison was one of the first forty pioneers to settle in Wyoming Valley. He was twenty-nine years old at the time. When the settlers arrived, they found colonists funded by the Penn family already here and surveying the land. The Pennsylvanians claimed that King Charles II had given them the land in 1681—which was indeed the case. Thus the land here in Wyoming Valley was claimed by three different groups: the Connecticut colonists called Yankees, the Pennsylvania colonists called Pennamites, and the Native Americans. Not surprisingly, the colonists began to fight over control of this territory. Their conflicts became known as the Yankee-Pennamite Wars. These wars would later become one of the reasons why the Articles of Confederation were replaced by the Constitution.



At various times first the Yankees controlled the valley and then the Pennamites did. While these wars were going on, Nathan Denison took a leading role in the governing of the Wyoming Valley. He was elected as director of Kingston Township (now Forty Fort) in 1774 and was appointed by the General Court as Justice of the Peace for Westmoreland Township. That was the name of this area given to it by Connecticut.

The Yankees pushed the Pennamites out of the valley for several years after the Battle of Rampart Rocks in what is now West Nanticoke in December of 1775. The Revolutionary War had just begun and would continue until the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783. During that war, the valley (now controlled by the Yankees), was attacked by the British. A force of Tories, some valley residents who had sided with the British against the colonists, Natives, and British Rangers under the command of Major John Butler invaded the

valley in late June of 1778. On July 3rd, they met a militia from the valley formed of older men and young boys, and a few regular army men who had left Washington's army near Philadelphia in order to help defend the valley. Most of our able-bodied men were fighting with the Patriots.

The valley militia left Forty Fort to attack the invaders. They were led by Zebulon Butler a regular army colonel and Nathan Denison second in command. Both of these men had argued that the militia should stay inside of Forty Fort as the strength of the enemy was not known.



However, arguments broke out and the men decided to leave the fort and attack. That decision resulted in their massacre. Denison was one of the survivors and later signed what is known as the Articles of Capitulation to the British John Butler inside the fort. The table on which the documents were signed is now in his historic home in Forty Fort. He had to sign as he would was in the militia and would not be taken as a prisoner. Zebulon Butler would have been taken so Denison stalled signing the documents until Zebulon Butler had escaped from the area.

He and Betsy Sill were married on Lot #1 in Wilkes-Barre which is now Kirby Hall part of Wilkes University. They moved to Forty Fort and established their home and seven children on the west side of the Susquehanna River.

Following the war, Luzerne County was created. Denison was a Justice of the Peace, a county judge and later elected to the Supreme Council of Pennsylvania (similar to our State Senate) headed by Ben Franklin. He died in January, 1809, and is buried in the Forty Fort cemetery in Forty Fort, Pennsylvania.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Denison House](#)

[Find A Grave](#)

[Denison House YouTube](#)

PRINT RESOURCES

Harvey, Oscar Jewell. A History of Wilkes-Barré, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. Wilkes-Barre, Pa.: Raeder Press. 1909.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Schedule a tour of the Denison House by calling the Luzerne County Historical Society.